SMALL FARM digest

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USDA Works to Streamline Transitions to Y2K

"Is your farm equipment Y2K compliant?"—Photo by Agricultural Research Service.

Y2K has been much in the news this year. An abbreviation for the year 2000, Y2K refers to how computer software programs and embedded microchips worldwide - programmed to identify a year by its last two digits - will interpret the new century on Jan. 1, 2000.

Will they read the year as 1900 instead? If so, this "bug" could cause date-driven computations to fail and computer-run systems to malfunction or shut down.

Machines and services run by computers, such as public utility, transportation, food delivery, building, banking, manufacturing, communications, and health care systems, on which we depend daily, could be affected.

For farmers, machines such as field irrigation and automated feeding, watering, and milking equipment, grain elevators, tractors, and combines could experience problems. Smaller operations may need to purchase new hardware and software. Solutions are more complex for large institutions with which small businesses interact, such as government agencies, banks, and insurance companies. However, nearly all of these institutions and industries have been working hard in recent months to make any serious Y2K problems unlikely to occur. Most experts expect only short-term failures from Y2K, probably localized in nature.

According to Anne Reed, Chief Information Officer for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, USDA's "mission critical" systems are on schedule to be sure that its farm and other important programs won't be interrupted by the Year 2000 computer bug. USDA computer systems and programs should be fixed and tested in time to correct any remaining problems prior to Jan. 1, 2000. Contingency plans are in place so that programs can still operate in case of failures.

USDA chairs the "Food Supply Working Group" of the President's Council on Year 2000, an interagency group established by the White House. The Council is working to raise awareness about the potential impact of the Y2K problem on producers, manufacturers, distributors, wholesalers, retailers, and other key players in the food supply chain, and to assess the "state of readiness" of the food supply.

The working group says, "The state of readiness within the food industry is encouraging. An interruption to the food supply so severe as to threaten the well-being and basic comfort of the American public is unlikely."

The study notes that major domestic companies that provide most of the key foods consumed by the public and by animals will continue to operate in spite of the Y2K problem.

With the deadline fast approaching, USDA continues to urge farmers, small businesses, and rural organizations to verify if their operations are at risk and to develop contingency plans.

Information about the Year 2000 problem can be found at the USDA home page (www.usda.gov), the Small Business Administration's home page (www.sba.gov), and the President's Council's home page (www.y2k.gov). A consumer hotline is available from the President's Council to provide up-to-date information, at 1-888-USA-4-Y2K. Information is also available through local county Extension offices.

Small Farm Success Story

Minority Farmers Market Produce to Schools

Glyen Holmes, an outreach coordinator for USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), found a new market for produce grown by small farmers in Florida's Panhandle Region - school districts.

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP), administered by USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), reaches 26 million school children in 95,000 U.S. public and nonprofit private schools and residential child care institutions every school day.

Since most school districts are set up to buy from cooperatives rather than individual farmers, Holmes founded the New North Florida Cooperative (NNFC). Sixteen limited-resource growers now sell produce directly to several school districts.

"The school lunch market is ideally suited for small farmers with 10 or fewer acres," says Holmes. "Farmers can move from traditional to specialty crops on smaller acreage, make a better return, and take less risk. Many cooperatives can deliver specialty niche produce like berries and greens cheaper than regular vendors but can't compete with big vendors of traditional foods supplied to schools."

Every school system is different, each market will have its own obstacles, and working with a farmer-friendly school system is critical. Cafeteria managers and school food service directors can explain their food and produce cut requirements. Local health departments can explain delivery requirements, and State agriculture departments can identify regulations.

USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) funded the Cooperative's pilot phase. Dan Schofer of AMS provided technical assistance. J'Amy Petersen, R.D., M.S., director of school food services for Florida's Gadsden County School District, worked available crops grown by small farmers into her breakfast and lunch menus. Vonda Richardson from Florida A&M University identified local farmers to participate, held record keeping courses for farmers, researched possible crops, recruited farm management advisors, and became project coordinator. Florida A&M University worked closely with the West Florida Resource Conservation and Development Council. Local banks made loans for start-up costs.

The NSLP partners with the Department of Defense (DOD) in their Fresh Produce Program. Thirty-eight States and one territory (Guam) use their USDA commodity food entitlement accounts to purchase fresh produce directly through DOD. DOD-registered vendors may bid to provide produce. The DOD Defense Supply Center in Philadelphia, PA, with 15 buying offices nationwide, negotiates purchases of quality produce. Holmes is exploring DOD markets.

"Farmer cooperatives need to expand their marketing to nontraditional customers like military, nursing home, prison, and hospital institutional food services," says Holmes.

To contact the National School Lunch Program, see the USDA website (www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Lunch/Default.htm), or call USDA/FNS Public Information at 703/305-2286. Contact the DOD Defense Supply Center, 2800 South 20th St., Philadelphia, PA 19145 (call Doug Steinmetz, Chief, Field Buying Branch, at 215/737-5996, or Jerry German, Senior Buying Specialist, Produce Office, Wicomico, VA, at 804/642-1809).

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Direct Marketing with a U-Pick Operation

Many farmers sell their products to consumers who do self-serve harvesting directly from the field - a practice known as "u-pick."

"There are advantages and disadvantages to any marketing outlet," says J.J. VanSickle, a marketing specialist at the University of Florida.

For u-pick operations, he says, "Advantages include eliminating the costs of harvesting and transporting produce to market and fees charged by produce dealers. A disadvantage is that growers may need to provide additional management and capital investment to prevent field damage and manage sales efficiently."

Insurance, advertising, traffic control, pricing, containers, and picker supervision are costs to consider.

The Appeal of U-Pick

"U-picks became popular after the 1970's oil embargo. In a back-to-the-land movement led by Baby Boomers, people came to buy fresh produce in bulk and process their own food," explains Duncan Hilchey, agricultural development specialist in the Farming Alternatives Program at Cornell University.

"The Baby Boomers are older now and have less time to process food. They demand and will pay top dollar for fresh, healthy food, and prefer to buy already made, value-added products. U-picks have declined in popularity from this standpoint.

"But a new tourism trend - where Americans are rediscovering their own cultural and historical roots in Rural America - indicates a profitable time for u-picks if farmers design their operations for today's customers."

Hilchey believes that today's u-pick customers come to a farm to:

- experience the farm itself, almost as if it were theirs,
- reconnect with their rural roots by having a leisurely agri-tourism experience in a pristine rural setting, and
- buy quality produce at reasonable prices.

Today's farmer must think like a marketer to understand demographic shifts and tourism trends.

Is U-Pick Marketing for You?

You should answer three questions if you're thinking about starting a u-pick operation.

First, do you want the public on your farm? Running a u-pick takes time, labor, creativity, sales expertise, and the ability to deal in a pleasant and positive way with diverse people who come to your farm. Not every farmer wants to give up privacy and have the public on his or her land for hours at a time. Visitors may cause some plant damage and even injure themselves.

Second, will your location work for a u-pick? Most u-pick customers drive less than 15 miles. U-pick's success greatly depends on a location within 30 miles of a major population center. Easy access from a major highway is a big plus.

Third, is there a market for your products? Find out if there are similar competing u-pick operations in your area. Talk to your local Cooperative Extension agent, visit other u-pick farms and local produce outlets to see what is selling, and ask customers what they buy.

Planning for Success

If you think a u-pick may work for you, consider several management issues:

Time and Labor. Running a successful u-pick requires coordinating farming with farm visits by large numbers of customers - while protecting both crops and customers. Further, most u-pick customers visit a farm only once every two months and spend only $5 to $10. Most farmers, therefore, need to combine a u-pick operation with other marketing approaches. Farm family members or hired staff must be present during announced hours.

You need to balance staffing costs - both the time and money - against potential income. Saturdays, for example, are apt to be good days both for selling at a farmers market and for u-pick customers. Which is the better use of your time?

Facilities. You will probably need to make some changes to your farm to accommodate a u-pick operation. Design u-pick facilities to handle the maximum number of anticipated customers. A parking lot is essential because parking along road rights-of-way is illegal. Paving is expensive, but gravel is a good alternative. Spaces should be larger than normal for customers to load purchases. Fences offer crowd control and discourage after-hours product theft.

The entrance, check-in, and sales areas should be well marked and neat with "farm atmosphere." Locate sales equipment in the check-out area, and provide picking containers for customer convenience and ease of weighing. Both employees and customers will appreciate restroom facilities with hand-washing basins, a playground, picnic tables, beverage machines, water fountains, and a shaded shelter at the sales counter.

What, When, and How Much to Plant. You should consider demand, growing conditions in your area, and potential return in deciding what to plant. Some crops are not well suited for u-picks:

- those that require picker

judgment to determine ripeness, such as sweet corn, cantaloupes, watermelons, and some tropical fruits,

- crops such as peaches and citrus that require ladders to pick, or
- expensive and easily damaged plants such as mangos and avocados.

Customers do not like to travel to a u-pick only to find that the crop they wanted is not available. Select the appropriate mix of crops and varieties that will stretch the production season, and coordinate planting with maturity dates. Although your ability to predict demand will grow with experience, you will still have the same problems of over- and under-supply that you face with any other marketing approach.

Planting with Visitors in Mind. Lay out crops or orchards to allow easy customer access. Try to plant in level areas for customer safety, and keep plots weed-free. Avoid locating plots near potentially hazardous areas, such as ponds, streams, farm buildings, livestock, etc. Plant crops that need the greatest amount of supervision - or that attract the greatest number of customers - closest to the check-out area. Plant different varieties of crops near each other to limit customer movement.

Advertising. Direct mailings, local newspaper ads, a website, and word-of-mouth are effective ways to advertise. Attractive road signs are important, as some customers discover u-picks while driving by. Local newspapers or radio/television stations may be willing to cover and publicize farm events, such as festivals.

Road Signs. Signs are critical in directing people to your farm. Signs most easily read from moving vehicles are black letters on yellow background, black on orange, yellow-orange on navy blue, dark green on white, red on white, and black on white. To be most visible, letters should be at least 1/5 as wide as they are tall.

Both Federal law and local ordinances restrict how road signs are used. Learn what restrictions apply in your locality. Several Federal laws apply to both temporary and permanent signs:

- Each sign must be at least 500 feet from an existing sign along a primary road and 1,000 feet from an existing sign facing the same direction along interstates.
- Signs can be only on property zoned as commercial and/or industrial.
- Signs must be at least 15 feet from highway rights-of-way.
- Signs posted within 100 feet of a business and on land owned or leased by a business person must refer only to merchandise sold and/or produced on the premises. However, agricultural producers may construct signs that advertise products available on a farm they own or lease.

Signs on Site. Well-placed, informative signs can save you from answering the same questions repeatedly. Provide directions from the road, to the parking lot, to the sales area, and finally to the picking fields. Numbered rows can guide customers to areas ready for picking and steer them away from immature produce. Explain the basics of selection and harvesting in a few simple words. Post prices clearly for customers to see before they begin picking.

Pricing Products. In setting a fair price for your product, retail prices may not be a good guide. Customers generally expect to pay less than retail for u-pick produce. However, many people are willing to pay a premium for good, fresh products.

How to set price - by weight or volume - is another question. Each method has its advantages and disadvantages. Pricing by weight is accurate and requires no special containers. Volume measures require providing standard containers and may also mean transferring products from the standard container to one that the customer can take home.

On the other hand, weighing takes more time and requires having an accurate, approved scale at the sales point. State inspection of scales is often required. Price per unit may be the best means of pricing some items, such as melons.

As with all marketing approaches, accurate records of your costs are key to making sure you receive an adequate return on your investment.

State and Local Legal Requirements. Special laws and regulations apply to direct marketing operations in general - and to u-pick operations in particular. Examples include permits, licenses, certification of scales, liability insurance, sewer hookups for restroom facilities, and handicapped access in bathroom and other areas. Your state Small Business Administration is a good place to learn about Federal, State, and local legal requirements you must follow.

Profit-Building Extras

Pre-Picked Produce. Many farmers find that their sales increase if they offer pre-harvested produce for customers who do not want to pick their own. Enthusiasm for field picking wears out quickly for some. For others, the farm visit is the key objective, not saving money by harvesting their own produce.

Identity. Develop a farm "identity." Capitalize on the positive aspects of your farm and its products. Labels and packaging can appeal to the sense of personal experience that Hilchey argues is important to many u-pick customers. A well-designed container

with a label that gives a special identity to a product is important.

Some States (usually their departments of agriculture) have logos. Growers in some regions have created local logos that highlight appealing aspects of the area and its products. In developing a label or packaging, look for your farm-raised products and consider factors that draw attention to cultural roots, heritage, region, and natural resources that the buyer can associate with your farm.

Inform your customers by highlighting the benefits or special qualities of your products. Consider posting a statement of your farm's philosophy in the check-out area. Brochures or business cards about your farm should be available at the check-out area, too, to encourage repeat business and word-of-mouth advertising. Illustrate your written materials.

Value-Added Products. Customers may buy additional products, such as jams and jellies, if they are available. These value-added products will often give you a higher return on your investment than u-pick produce alone. Learn the food safety laws, labeling requirements, and other regulations that you must follow if you want to develop your own value-added products to sell on your farm.

Customer Loyalty. Think about ways to develop personal interactions with your customers so that they're likely to return. Customers who feel an emotional bond to a grower are likely to remain loyal, even if they can buy the same product for a lesser price at a commercial outlet.

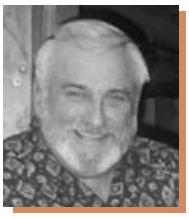
Agri-Tourism. Many farmers find that agri-tourism or farm entertainment boosts business. Examples include personalized pumpkin patches, festivals, tours, gift shops, hay mazes, rides, petting zoos, and food services. Many international tourists also want to experience rural America. A valued-added product from an American farm is the perfect gift for tourists who want something to remind them of their visit to the U.S. Contact bus and tour operators to bring foreign visitors to your farm.

Diversified Marketing

Many successful small farmers use a diversity of marketing approaches to help them retain more of the consumer's food dollar, get greater returns on investment, and help spread the risks of using only one marketing outlet. For the farmers who use them, u-picks may be just one component in an overall marketing strategy. ▮

Your Small Farm Neighbors

Bud Kerr, a "U-Pick" Farmer Who Farms for the Future



Bud Kerr.—Photo by Stephanie Olson

With his busy schedule, it is difficult to think of Bud Kerr as "retired," though this was his intention in January 1997, when he retired as director of CSREES' former Office for Small-Scale Agriculture (now CSREES' Small Farm Program) and as editor of Small-Scale Agriculture Today (now Small Farm Digest).

"People have no idea how much pleasure I received from my job at USDA," Kerr says. "During my 40 years there, I was able to sow seeds of opportunity for small farmers by sharing ideas with them, and then to see the harvest through the letters they wrote me describing their successes."

While still in his full-time job at USDA, Kerr developed Arrowhead Farm, a part-time, 17-acre strawberry, peach, and thornless blackberry "pick-your-own" operation near Baltimore, MD. Today, Kerr grows soybeans and corn on the farm, and fruit trees, Christmas trees, and berries in his large backyard garden.

These days, however, Kerr increasingly is thinking about the future.

"Fifty years from now, my farm will be a park for the city of Baltimore, entrusted to my grandchildren," he muses. "That is part of the freedom farmers have - to live and work on the land and to keep it green for generations to come."

"Small farmers farm for the community, the country, and the future," he reflects. "They are good stewards. We must preserve the land because too many people are leaving rural life, wildlife is disappearing, and small farms often turn into housing developments."

Dreams for the future? Kerr has a few. Someday he hopes to take a year off, travel across the country, interview the small farmers he has not yet met, and write a book about them.

"Small farmers are the heartbeat of rural agriculture," he says, "and their stories deserve to be told."

Any final thoughts? "Retirement has not dimmed my love for small-scale farming or my admiration for people engaged in it," he says.

"At your next meal and at every meal, say a prayer and a thank-you for the dedicated cadre of people who produce food and fiber for our tables and ourselves - America's small farmers."

Kerr lives at 5610 Avondale Drive, Bowie, MD 20715. ▮

The Merrions

Joe and Gina Merrion, owners of the 23-acre, family-run Hilltop Christmas Tree Farm in historic Hancock, NH, have been in business for 25 years.

With the help of Bobby Fogg, their right-hand man, their choose and cut operation now has 8,000 trees in various stages of growth. In November and December, customers can select from 2,000 Balsam Fir, Douglas Fir, Scotch Pine, and Blue Spruce on the Merrions' farm.

Hilltop Farm benefits from advertising on the Internet, in local newspaper ads, and by word-of-mouth. One of the keys to a successful choose and cut operation is to sell the experience and the farm, not just the product. The Merrions are experts.

"We try to make a visit to our Christmas tree farm an experience for the whole family and involve the local community," said Joe. "Many customers spend up to an hour and a half choosing their tree.

"They come with video camera and film the whole experience - from arrival when they are greeted by local Boy Scouts, to selecting and cutting down their tree, wrapping the tree with a special netting, and packing the tree for the ride home."

Customers are given toboggans for their trip to the tree stand. The Merrions let local Boy Scouts sell wreaths in exchange for greeting customers and helping run trees through the netting machine. A local nonprofit organization sells homemade cookies and hot chocolate.

"Customers even ask us to pose for the camera and wave goodbye," laughs Joe.

To learn more, visit the Hilltop Farm website (www.pobox.com/~merrions).

Bobby Fogg, and Gina and Joseph Merrion in a stand of their farm-raised trees.—Photo by Joseph Merrion

Bud, Joe and Gina's Tips for U-Pick Success

- Keep your u-pick farm a small family operation with a friendly atmosphere.
- Use big, simple, and colorful road signs showing products grown with an arrow pointing the way to your u-pick farm or produce stand.
- Enhance your farm's image by keeping the buildings and grounds clean and neat, and pay attention to small details such as keeping the edges of fields clipped.
- Build a loyal clientele by trusting and respecting customers and by selling generous portions of your product.
- Sell $1, $3, or $5 baskets of produce so that customers pay with bills, decreasing the labor needed to make change.
- Provide customers recipes keyed to the produce you sell and handouts with product information from your State growers association.
- Raffle off a farm-raised product to build a customer mailing list from ticket receipts.
- Establish good relationships with your local community by giving talks on agricultural topics to garden and flower clubs or gleaning produce for donation to community food banks.

RESOURCES

A wide range of resources is available to assist small farmers and ranchers and their communities. Readers wishing further information about the resources listed below are asked to contact the individuals or offices listed for each item.

Print Media

A Guide to Successful Direct Marketing. Written by Charles R. Hall and Jeff L. Johnson, this 32-page guide addresses everything that a direct marketer using a u-pick operation, roadside stand, or farmer's market needs to know to be successful. Developing a business plan, advertising, quality control, product display techniques, and pricing are covered. Cost: $12. To order: make check payable to T.E.E.F. (Texas Extension Education Foundation) Acct. #5550 and mail to Tracy Davis, Texas Agricultural Extension Service, Texas A&M University, 464 Blocker Building, College Station, TX 77843-2124 (telephone: 409/845-1772; fax: 409/847-9378; e-mail: tdavisf@tamu.edu).

Fresh Produce Marketing (B-5053). Written by economist Charles R. Hall, this free bulletin describes wholesale markets for producers who cannot sell all products directly and are getting large enough to sell to brokers, restaurants, food service firms, and wholesale distributors. Covers market research needed before planting; post-harvest steps like cooling, quality control, transport, selling; how to calculate pre-harvest and post-harvest costs; and how to do a marketing plan. To order: contact Tracy Davis, Texas Agricultural Extension Service, Texas A&M University, 464 Blocker Building, College Station, TX 77843-2124 (telephone: 409/845-1772; fax: 409/847-9378; e-mail: tdavisf@tamu.edu).

Marketing Your Produce Directly to Consumers (EXT 741). Written by V. J. Parker-Clark, this 6-page 1992 bulletin describes how to define your product, do market research, and market your product through a roadside stand, roadside market, farmer's market, u-pick operation, subscription selling, or gift baskets. The author describes site selection, traffic flow, pricing, merchandising, and promotional strategies. Cost: $1.00. To order: contact Connie King, Ag Publications, University of Idaho, Moscow, ID 83844-2240 (telephone: 208/885-7982; fax: 208/885-4648; e-mail: cking@uidaho.edu).

Planning Your Business (CIS 978). Written by L.D. Makus, this 4-page 1993 fact sheet gives basic information about starting a business, including financing, proposing new enterprises, management, and marketing. Samples of an income statement, balance sheet, and projected income are given. Cost: $.50. To order: contact Connie King, Ag Publications, University of Idaho, Moscow, ID 83844-2240 (telephone: 208/885-7982; fax: 208/885-4648; e-mail: cking@uidaho.edu).

Small Farmer's Journal. A quarterly magazine that features practical farming information about livestock and homesteading and stories from farmers who tell how they began. Cost: $24.00 per year subscription. To order: contact Small Farmer's Journal, Order Code 832-560, P.O. Box 1627, Sisters, OR 97759-1627 (telephone: 541/549-2064). Questions: Karen Wheeler in Florida (telephone: 352/486-4370).

OPPORTUNITIES

A number of grant, loan, and training programs are available to support small farmers and their communities. Examples of such programs are summarized below. Readers wishing additional information are asked to contact the individuals or offices listed for each item.

Grants, Loans, Training

Ben & Jerry's Foundation. Competitive grants are available to small U.S. grassroots organizations that work to change the underlying conditions that cause social and environmental problems. Interested parties should first call or write to receive grant guidelines and application materials. These may also be accessed from the website. Applications for grants of less than $1,000 will be considered on the basis of the initial application without requiring a full proposal. Deadlines to submit a full proposal for invited applicants are March 1, July 1, and November 1. Full awards range from $1,000 to $15,000. For more information or to receive grant application guidelines, contact: Ben & Jerry's Foundation, 30 Community Drive, S. Burlington, VT 05403-6828 (telephone: 802/846-1500, ext. 7485; website: www2.benjerry.com/foundation).

Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE). Graduate Student Awards in Sustainable Agriculture. Masters and Ph.D. students enrolled at an accredited college or university in the Southern Region can apply to the SARE Program for funding for research projects that address issues of sustainable agriculture of current and potential importance to the Southern Region. The maximum limits for Southern SARE graduate student awards in sustainable agriculture are $10,000, and no more than 3 years' duration. Proposals for the Southern Region SARE Program, which serves Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands, must be received by December 8, 1999. For additional information, contact John C. Mayne, Ph.D., Southern Region SARE Program, 1109 Experiment St., Griffin, GA 30223 (telephone: 770/412-4787; e-mail: jmayne@gaes.griffin.peachnet.edu).

Upcoming Events

Date	Event	Location	Contact
Sept. 15-Oct. 20	*Beginning a Successful Small Farm Operation Night Course (Wednesdays)*	Frederick, MD	Terry Poole - 301/694-1594
Sept. 22-24	*SARE Professional Development Program - Regional Soils Project Train the Trainer Workshop*	Raleigh, NC	Rosanne Minarovic - 919/515-3252
Sept. 25	*6th Annual Country Living Field Day*	Augusta, OH	Mike Hogan - 330/627-4310
Oct. 10-13	*Rural TeleCon '99: The 3rd Annual Rural Telecommunications Conference*	Aspen, CO	Toni Black - 1-800-621-8559, Ext. 8365
Oct. 12-15	*2nd National Small Farm Conference*	St. Louis, MO	Troy Darden - 573/681-5587, or website www.luce.lincolnu.edu/nsfc
Oct. 20-23	*Sustaining Rural Environments Conference*	Flagstaff, AZ	Alan A. Lew - 520/523-6567 e-mail: alan.lew@nau.edu
Oct. 30	*Florida Small Farm Day*	Brooksville, FL	Wayne Odegaard - 352/754-4433
Nov. 14-17	*Marketing and Shipping Live Aquatic Products `99 Conference*	Seattle, WA	John B. Peters - 206/855-9506 e-mail: JohnBPeters@compuserve.com

See Small Farm website (www.reeusda.gov/smallfarm) for the most up-to-date listing of events. We welcome submissions of events from our subscribers that would be of interest to the small farm community so that our Upcoming Events listing reflects a diversity of events from all regions of the country. Please send submissions to Stephanie Olson, Editor, *Small Farm Digest*, CSREES, USDA, Mail Stop 2220, 1400 Independence Ave., S.W., Washington, DC 20250-2220 (phone: 202/401-1602; e-mail: solson@reeusda.gov).

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